

BRINGING HEALTH TO

Story and Photos by
Tech. Sgt. G. A. Volb

THE expressions on the faces of men, women and children from the village of Plan de Leones, Honduras, said it all: The villagers had endured a five-hour wait in the sweltering heat, yet their wide smiles told members of Joint Task Force-Bravo's visiting medical readiness team that they were most welcome.

Stationed at Soto Cano Air Base in Honduras, JTF-Bravo is composed of about 400 U.S. service members — predominantly from the Army — who support multinational exercises, humanitarian-aid missions and drug interdiction operations. They perform such missions as building schools and roads, digging wells and providing medical care.

This day, it was JTF-Bravo's medical element that took the lead by making one of its regular trips into the Honduran countryside. They provided medical

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help to those who typically go without it.

Upon arriving at the small village wedged among the Comayagua Mountains, 90 minutes north of the base, the team members found that word of their scheduled visit had reached far and wide. Some of the roughly 400 people waiting in the area had walked hours in the heat to receive medical attention.

Several lines wound around the schoolyard fence, toward the town



A Honduran army officer gives local people an initial briefing during JTF-B's medical readiness mission to the town of Plan de Leones.

church and down a nearby hill. Among the throng of people were the elderly and young mothers with infants. All came seeking help for ailments that had gone unattended for too long.

"For many, this is the first time they've seen a doctor," said CPT Bret Buehner, a nurse and the officer in charge of the mission.

Word of mouth is what keeps JTF-Bravo's medical readiness missions alive, he said. "We tell local leaders when we plan to be in their village, and they spread the word."

The team — three physicians, three nurses, a dental surgeon and various support personnel —



Deiby Argentina Bonilla, 13, of Plan de Leones receives a vaccination from a local nurse during JTF-B's visit.

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HONDURAS

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Assisted by SPC Ricky Baxter (center), physician's assistant CPT Lyn Riat examines one of Plan de Leones' younger citizens.

provides everything from health-care briefings to dental and gynecological exams. Typically, it visits several villages in any given week, traveling to remote sites to reach the country's majority — people whose annual income is well below the national poverty level.

Young mothers don't realize the health risk to their infants ...

"The major issue we deal with here is a lack of education about health care," said Dr. Carlos Duron, a local physician who worked with the JTF-Bravo team. "It's important that we

teach the people about the importance of sanitation, proper waste disposal and nutrition if we're going to break the cycle of malnutrition and disease in this country."

If the medical team members can teach the people of rural Honduras something about preventative medicine and the criticality of proper nutrition from the time a baby is born, "we might be able to break that cycle," Duron said.

Young mothers, for example, don't realize the health risk to their infants from giving them whole milk or formula in lieu of breast-feeding them too soon after birth. Because their digestive systems aren't yet developed enough to handle processed foods, the babies develop diarrhea, gastrointestinal problems, dehydration and malnutrition, because they're not getting the



Townpeople awaiting their turn in the clinic peer through the window as others line up outside.

vitamins and minerals they need for healthy development.

For some mothers, the benefits of attending an educational program like those offered by the JTF-Bravo team are immediate, Buehner said.

"This was good for my family," said Median Ventura, the 20-year-old mother of a 7-month-old son. "This is the first time in months I've been able to get him to a doctor," said Ventura, whose son suffered from the nutritional problems Duron described. After attending a short seminar on nutrition, she was confident she could better care for him.

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"We have to teach them to take care of themselves," said CPT Lyn Riat, a physician's assistant. "Providing temporary remedies on visits like this one will help for a little while, but educating the people here is a much more viable long-term solution to their medical problems."

Sometimes it's tough getting up in the morning knowing you'll be traveling over haphazard roads in austere parts of Central America, said Buehner. "But all of us on the team love what we're doing. And we feel like we're doing some good." □

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